



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

THE CASE OF JOHN SMITH¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

"It's Plato's opinion, sir" (Boswell was speaking), "that Germany, having betrayed her religion and having perverted her science, neither Luther nor Leibnitz has any *locus standi*, and as far as Kant is concerned, he agrees with Aristotle that the Court has too many philosophers already." You see, the question before the Court was whether Germany can be re-admitted on any terms to the comity of nations. The proceedings had opened with a speech from Tolstoi—very good in its way, if a little sloppy in places. Universal brotherhood was his ticket, non-resistance to evil and so on. "Of course," as Boswell observed, "it doesn't quite work out, but it was a very creditable effort, very creditable indeed—especially for an old man who can't button his own collar." The proposal of Spinoza that Germany should be more fully represented than by himself, Goethe, and Beethoven, was opposed, as we have seen, by Plato and Aristotle, upon grounds which seemed to Boswell likely to be accounted just. No doubt the Court was swayed by the eloquence of Lincoln; for, according to Boswell's report, they had Abraham on his legs again, and he gave them a "regular rasper": "he didn't half let Germany have it, sir." And if one wonders how Goethe took it, why, he took it "like a lamb": "he just sat in the corner crying like a child."

If the foregoing may seem, at first glance, a little vague in orientation, you will have to go straight to the original source in the case: the scene at the Wellwood Sanitarium in Mr. Snaith's extraordinary allegorical fantasy which

¹ *The Coming*, by J. C. Snaith. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1917.

has left its critics in the unhappy position of not knowing whether they were dealing with a humorist or a mystic (it being inconceivable, of course, that a mystic could stoop to humor, despite the seemingly authentic case of that consummate master of ironic wit, Jesus of Nazareth). At the risk of upsetting, to his own disadvantage, all the snugly applicable formulæ of valuation, Mr. Snaith has committed the literary sin that is beyond shriving: he has confounded classification. We have noted the plight of those wistful souls who have not felt sure whether he was to be sternly dealt with as a "mystic," or indulged as the contriver of a rather laborious jest. There are others who, while unwilling to go the length of interning Mr. Snaith as a "mystic," have yet been unpersuaded whether he was quite serious in this tale of the bucolic visionary who thought he was accomplishing the Second Advent.

It seems like a deliberately unfriendly act on the part of Mr. Snaith that he should upset the critical apple-carts by frivolously mixing a slyly ironic glee, an almost depraved satirical sportiveness, with the exaltation and the passionate gravity of one who discusses religion as if it were still a living force in the kingdoms of the mind. Mr. Snaith should not so disconcertingly and so confusingly misbehave. If he was restive under an assumption of sustained solemnity, he might at least have been obliging enough to indulge in the kind of comic relief—duly compartmented and clearly ticketed—with which Mr. Wells so considerably lightens his discourses upon spiritual themes. But instead of doing this, Mr. Snaith dyes the fabrics of his altar-cloths and his sacerdotal vestments with hues that are bafflingly changeable, so that one instant they are shimmering in the light of his flickering wit and the next are of an impenetrable depth and a richly shadowed beauty. To do this is to break all the rules of the game. One remembers the perplexity of that candid critic in *Fanny's First Play* who asked how a reviewer is to pass an opinion upon a new dramatic composition if he does not know who the author is? So, how is one to appraise a puzzling fiction if one does not know whether one is confronting a spiritual fable or a burlesque?

There is no mistaking the identity of the prototype of Mr. Snaith's John Smith, even though this village dreamer with the gaunt, sensitive, beautiful face and the sunken, luminous eyes, the gentle voice, the strange, exalted speech

—even though this odd dreamer does unwittingly plagiarize Ibsen to the alienist and the vicar.

“There are harps in the air,” observed John Smith.

“I don’t hear a sound,” said Dr. Parker.

“Nor I,” said the vicar—“or if I do, it is the water of the mill by Burkett’s farm.”

It is scarcely to be wondered at that when John Smith, standing on the furze-clad village common, his frail, bare-headed, poorly-clad figure outlined against the clear sky of an English June, said calmly to the vicar and to Dr. Parker that the voice of God spoke to him continually, the vicar and the doctor abruptly quitted the impious presence of John Smith, leaving him there among the wild orchis and the bracken of the Sussex common, and decided that the public interest demanded his incarceration.

And so John Smith was put away at the instance of Mr. Thomas Perry-Hennington, vicar of the hamlet of Penfold-with-Churly, on the borders of Sussex and Kent—an Oxford-bred Christian “without [in his own words] intellectual smear.” The vicar’s God was a God who spoke in Mr. Perry-Hennington’s ear with the accent of an English public school, and used the language of Dr. Pusey and Dr. Westcott. But after August, 1914—after the retreat from Mons—the Sussex hills, once so tranquil and secure under their sheltering English skies, changed to a world as new and sinister as that disclosed to the startled vision of Mr. Wells’s celebrated Bishop. With this enormous difference: that the Bishop awoke to a new heaven and a new earth, whereas Mr. Perry-Hennington merely tossed unhappily in his sleep and dreamed nightmares.

The measure of the profundity of his spiritual slumber and the opacity of the film over his eyes is of course, in Mr. Snaith’s searching and deeply-felt parable, the vicar’s reaction to John Smith. It is hard to see how the transparency of the parable could have been enhanced. Its symbolism seems as unescapable and as simply poignant as that of a flag-draped coffin at a military funeral. Those naïve and troubled souls who have wondered whether Mr. Snaith was wallowing in “mysticism” or merely joking have perhaps been needlessly perplexed by assuming that he exhibits his village messiah as also the village idiot. But Mr. Snaith, of course, does nothing of the sort. His treatment of John Smith is throughout rigorously objective; and therein lies

the peculiar force of his parable. It is to the vicar and the local men of science that John Smith seems merely a crack-brained rustic, a religious maniac; it is the vicar who procures his incarceration. Mr. Snaith, manipulating with a gently ironic smile the broadly typified and symbolized marionettes in his dramatic parable, stands non-committally in the wings. Yet for one and all, the moral of his tragic-comedy blazes in the sign above the entrance: "He came to his own and his own knew him not."

We should not quarrel, however, with anyone who chose to say that in this singular and touching book,—that is in the main so shrewd, so witty, so astringent, so deeply pitiful, of so level a gaze, so true a vision,—there are passages of an unpersuasiveness that are hard to forget. We wish that the marvellous and world-conquering drama of John Smith had dropped out of the plot before Mr. Snaith relinquished his manuscript to the publishers; we wish that the vicar had not been converted in just the manner that Mr. Snaith portrays. Yet, after all, if it were not for the incident of the wonderful play and its winning of the Nobel Prize, we should not have had that unforgettable last chapter: surely one of the richest passages in the literature of spiritual satire.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.